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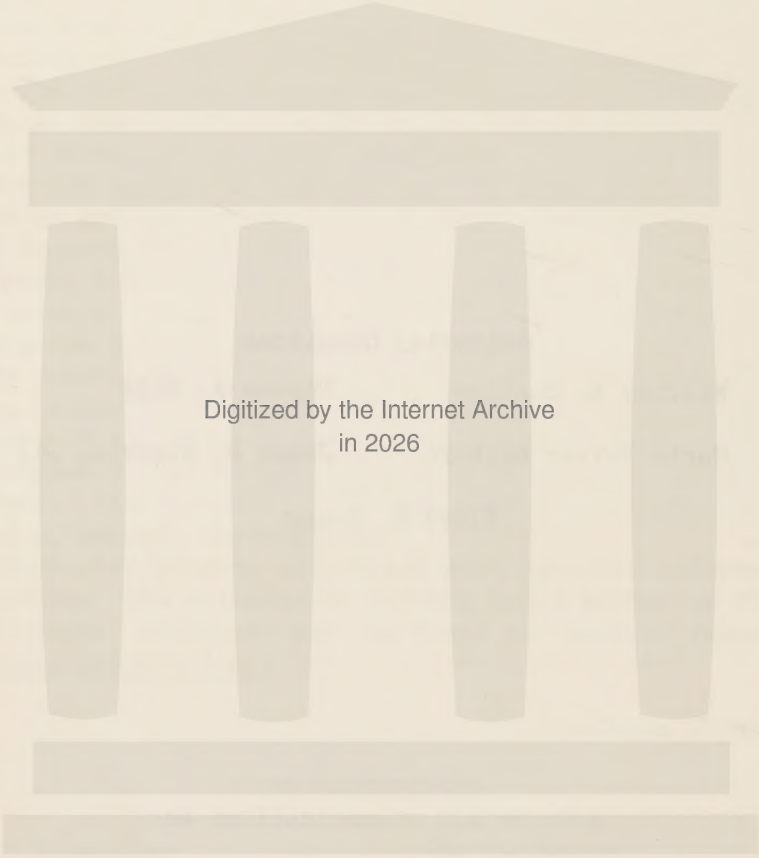
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PRACTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Editorial Remarks

This Issue

It may be in order for me to say that the article in this issue is meant to get the ball rolling a little faster in our exploration of cultural relativism and what the Christian should do with it. I do not feel particularly qualified to write on the subject as I have little practical cross-cultural experience and have not thought the problem through as carefully as I'd like. I realize then, that some of the thoughts expressed may be in error, but I am willing to risk that if it will provoke you to think on the matter and share your thoughts and experiences on the subject with the rest of us. I am deeply convinced that we need to get into this significant problem now. I know from correspondence and teaching experience that this is bothering Christian workers in various ways. We will be happy to receive from you either additional articles or brief communications concerning this matter.

By coincidence Mr. Samarin's letter in this issue deals with a problem related to the application of the anthropological doctrine of cultural relativism to missions. I hope that more of you will take advantage of the discussion section to share with us your thoughts on this and other matters. Take another look at some of the articles we have published. Several of them raise questions which require further attention.

Next Year

By now you should have received an invitation to subscribe to Practical Anthropology for 1955. Let this serve as a reminder to you if you have not yet taken action on this. We need your help. One other concrete thing you can do is to encourage others who may be interested to subscribe. We have more subscribers for this year than we expected simply because a number of you did this.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM FOR THE CHRISTIAN

Robert B. Taylor

It is fairly safe to say that the central doctrine of cultural anthropology is cultural relativism. It is a doctrine of which the anthropologist is proud and which he feels has a solid factual basis.

Cultural relativism is largely the by-product of the cherished "cross-cultural" point of view. Anthropologists believe that this cross-cultural approach provides them with a significant advantage over other human behavior disciplines, which often have sought to interpret human behavior from the culture-bound and therefore limited perspective provided by the study of civilized culture. The anthropologist prefers to test every generalization about man by utilizing the widest possible sample of human behavior. Such testing is made possible by the well established anthropological principle that there are no significant physiological, psychological or intellectual differences among the races. It follows that any significant differences are culturally learned rather than biologically inherited.

The fact that Margaret Mead's observations on Samoan adolescence have been cited over and over again in the anthropological literature reflects the pride anthropologists have in the cross-cultural approach. Everyone knows that it is "natural" for the adolescent to suffer a period of insecurity, awkwardness, and emotional upheaval; everyone, that is, except the anthropologist and others who maintain the cross-cultural viewpoint or have read and believed Margaret Mead! The latter know that if American adolescents were raised according to the patterns of Samoan culture the transition from childhood to adulthood would be accomplished without undue social awkwardness or emotional upset. The culture-bound observer would suppose American adolescent behavior to be rooted in the inherited processes of maturation and therefore inevitable for all human groups. The anthropologist applies a cross-cultural test and finds the generalization incorrect.

The anthropologist manifests a comparable sense of pride in cultural relativism, the view that values and morals are relative to their socio-cultural context and that one way of life (culture) cannot be judged to be superior to another. A term has been coined for an opposite view, that is, ethnocentrism. The ethnocentric person holds that his way of life is superior to others. Some people are more ethnocentric than others, but it has been noted frequently that Americans are notoriously ethnocentric. After all, don't they have the highest standard of living, the greatest amount of technical ingenuity, and the best form of government in the world?

In the remainder of this paper I propose to evaluate the relativistic and ethnocentric points of view and make some suggestions as to the Christian's attitude and employment of them. Let it be emphasized that my purpose is not to serve any final pronouncements on the subject. Certainly my experience is too limited for that. But I do hope to stimulate discussion of this problem which is so significant for Christians.

It is apparent that one may be a total relativist or a partial relativist; extremely ethnocentric or mildly so; or, perhaps, indifferent or agnostic; or any other position extreme relativism and extreme ethnocentrism. Where should the Christian stand?

Actually the view opposite to cultural relativism need not be ethnocentrism, but it may and usually does involve the view that "my culture is best". The Christian will not be likely to believe that cultures are equal in quality for that would commit him to moral relativism. Christians in Western society usually suppose that Western culture is Christian culture and are, therefore, ethnocentric to a greater or lesser degree. His position is opposed to that of the anthropologist.

Not all anthropologists profess to be "total relativists", though many do, and virtually all may be said to be strongly relativistic. They like to point out that what is

"right" in one culture may be "wrong" in another and vice versa. There are no established absolutes, but customs and morals are relative to the culture. Monogamy may be fine in one culture, but in a society with a significant surplus of women and the belief that every woman has an inalienable right to bear children ploygyny is right. Most anthropologists, accordingly, take a dim view of the missionary's efforts to stamp out polygyny. Likewise, premarital relations may be out of order in our culture, but such is not the case with those peoples among whom "trial marriage" is an established and accepted custom. Some anthropologists would even go farther and propose relaxation of the stigma against premarital relationships in our own society. It is easy to see why Christians who encounter the more extreme forms of relativism in anthropology are likely to recoil. Obviously, total relativism would pull the rug out from under the whole missionary enterprise.

Total relativism has not been too successful, however, and there is a tendency on the part of a number of anthropologists to reject it. Robert Redfield of the University of Chicago has taken pains to elaborate on the deficiencies of relativism as professed by his fellow anthropologists.[1] Ruth Benedict, in her famous Patterns of Culture, declared that all cultures are "equally valid". The difficulty of consistently maintaining such a position was made evident when in the same book she referred to the "social waste" caused by the economic rivalry in Kwakiutl culture. This rivalry, she stated, "ranks low in the scale of human values. Redfield's conclusion is that she failed to find all cultures equally good, in spite of her profession of total relativism.

In 1947 the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association submitted a statement to the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations suggesting that since no scientific technique of qualitatively evaluating cultures has been discovered we must respect differences between cultures and defend the right of all men to live in terms of their own traditions.[2] H. G. Barnett was quick to point out the inconsistency of saying that we should

respect cultural differences after having professed agnosticism on the subject of values. The committee could have suggested just as consistently that we should hate all cultures. Possibly some were disconcerted by the realization that such a doctrine would necessitate permitting headhunters to continue their activities, including the collection of the heads of anthropologists! Obviously, it would mean tolerating Russian disregard for human decency and racial persecution in South Africa. It seems impossible, both logically and practically, to maintain a total relativism.

The position being taken by those anthropologists who are rejecting extreme relativism is probably well exemplified by the view of Clyde Kluckhohn.[3] It is a more moderate view in which absolutes or universals are recognized, though not yet discovered or verified. They have no supernatural basis but spring from the human nature common to members of all races and peoples regardless of their culture. Though undiscovered they are probably discoverable by scientific investigation. This view is an improvement over extreme relativism, but it still leaves relativism strongly in command of the field, including such things as, premarital intercourse, mercy killing of the aged and polygamy.

It may seem that there is a fundamental incompatibility between anthropology and Christianity due to the centrality of cultural relativism in the former. In fact, some Christian educators are quite wary of anthropological study for Christians for this very reason. They are afraid of the effect exposure to such a doctrine will have on the young Christian. We must not be so obtuse as to deny the danger, but ignoring the doctrine and trying to shelter Christians from it is apt to have more disastrous consequences than meeting it head on. As in so many other areas Christians are too prone to resort to an unfortunate isolationism which does not honor the Lord. This approach will not work because relativism is steadily permeating our whole culture. The Christian who has been protected from it is only too apt to meet it in some unfavorable time and place and be

severely shaken if not rendered ineffective. Cultural and moral relativism is especially powerful because of the apparent validity of the cross-cultural evidence for it. Unchecked relativism strikes hard at Christian belief; we cannot afford to ignore it. How should Christians react?

One good way to react, I feel, is to entertain a moderate position of relativism, not in the spirit of "if you can't lick 'em, join 'em", but because such a position is both practically valuable and Scripturally defensible. More harm has been done to Christian enterprise by extreme ethnocentrism on the part of Christians than we realize.

Unwarranted ethnocentrism on the part of the Christian is wrong because it commits him to an intolerance and bigotry which is detrimental to the effective carrying out of Christ's commission to evangelize the world and minister to human needs. A fundamental mistake which has been made by Christians is the equation of Western culture with Christianity. Most thoughtful Christians, if faced with the issue, will recognize that Western culture is not Christian culture, but in their dealings with nonWesterners they continue to act as though they are the same.

This is not the place to evaluate the role of Christianity in the development of Euro-American civilization, but it is important to maintain an awareness of the fact that there is much in Western culture which is both unnecessary in a Christian culture or even quite incompatible with Christian principles. Among those customs unnecessary to a Christian culture are such things as eating three times a day, shaking hands, and the installment plan. Some which are definitely opposed to Christianity are the belief that Negroes are inferior, gossiping, and our lack of emphasis on love. A large part of Western culture, including much of what is regarded as being Christianity, has little or no Scriptural basis; it is culturally derived.

Missions would profit greatly from a moderate relativism on the part of Christians. There seems to be a significant correlation between the degree of understanding the

missionary has for a people and the effectiveness of his efforts. Cultural relativism promotes understanding of culturally different peoples while ethnocentrism obscures it. We must get over the idea that our culture is superior to all other cultures in every respect, for this blinds us to the valid aspects of non-Western cultures. It is the usual thing in some Christian quarters to shake the head over heathenism and paint primitive culture as black as possible. Blackness is there, yes, but we should not paint them so black that we can't see them. As a result of this overemphasis on the blackness of heathenism there are probably some Christians who believe that nonliterate peoples spend most of their time indulging in terrible orgies of sexual perversion and cruel mutilation. If we are to understand non-Western cultures we must be able to see what is really there. There is good in every culture, and we should seriously consider the possibility that some primitive cultures are actually superior in some ways to our own.

If we can learn this lesson it may prevent us from unnecessarily and destructively forcing our way of life on non-Western peoples. When Christianity is brought into a society there will be of necessity changes in the culture, but too often the missionary effort has included the attempt to legislate unnecessary changes which throw the culture into a state of disorganization with consequences seriously detrimental to further missionary success. The most publicized example of this today is the Mau Mau society of the Kikuyu of Kenya. We are told that Christian missions must bear a significant portion of the responsibility for this situation.

Not only will an understanding and respect for cultural differences keep us from insisting on unnecessary changes, but it will aid us to help people in developing indigenous expressions of Christianity. The Christian culture of non-Westerners need not be patterned after Euro-American culture: the indigenous culture should provide the base for the outworking of a Christian culture, which will be peculiar to the society. A very few missionaries feel that the missionary should adopt a hands-off policy. By this view

the missionary's responsibility would be to get God's Word into the hands of the people so that they can work out their own Christian culture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and without missionary interference. This idea is one we should consider carefully. Nevertheless, it is my feeling that since the Holy Spirit uses human agency the missionary may well assume some responsibility as a spiritual guide. If he is to do this, however, he must have the most complete understanding possible of the significance of cultural differences and the culture itself. Otherwise he is not properly prepared to be a channel of the Holy Spirit in guiding non-Western Christians. Just how far a missionary should go in adopting a hands-off policy needs further discussion and clarification, but there are some who would feel that it would be far better to err in that direction than to go to the other extreme. Probably most missionaries have believed they must preside over the development of the Christian culture, some have been openly dictatorial.

A moderate cultural relativism will also have the effect of fostering more satisfactory personal relationships between Christian and non-Christian. There are few factors more vital in the transmission of the Christian message of salvation than the nature of the relationship between the Christian witness and the recipient of his testimony.

In missions especially ethnocentrism on the part of the missionary has at many points caused the non-Christian to reject Christianity. The ethnocentrism of the missionary has caused him to assume an attitude of superiority relative to the people he deals with which is readily detected and resented. Racial prejudice, which is better understood as cultural prejudice (ethnocentrism) re-inforced by a belief in racial differences in psychology, is a significant part of this attitude.

The Christian's ethnocentrism blinds him to the many valid aspects of the native or non-Christian culture and tends to deprive him of the understanding heart which is so desirable for the effective expression of Christian love.

The missionary who makes an issue of his disrespect for a cherished custom or manifests a lack of appreciation of the real meaning and value of that custom to the people is apt to find difficulty gaining a hearing for his message. Conversely, the missionary who, though he realizes that a custom is not tolerable in a Christian culture, shows love and understanding concerning the difficulty people may have in abandoning it will probably be able to maintain the kind of personal relations that he needs for effective witness.

The same principle applies to those of us at home. The various Christian groups have built up their own little subcultures consisting of different doctrines and standards of conduct. They frequently suppose themselves to have a corner on Christian truth, that is, they are very ethnocentric about this little subculture of theirs. Thus they are unable to be understanding about differing cultural and subcultural systems whether they be other Christian subcultures or the non-Christian subcultures of the larger society. Instead of finding what Scripture really has to say and modifying their cultural traits to conform to Scriptural principles they unwittingly distort Scripture to find support for their culturally established beliefs. I'm afraid all of us are subject to this in varying degrees, and we should become more keenly aware of it.

This kind of ethnocentrism has at least two serious consequences. One is that the various Christian groups are so intent on maintaining their cultural prejudices that they are not able to cooperate with one another for more effective Christian service. Their criticism of one another, in some cases, becomes real hate, and they violate the second greatest commandment Christ gave, that is, to love others.

The other result is that Christians are so critical of non-Christian customs that they can't witness effectively. Instead of understanding the non-Christian culture and manifesting love for the non-Christian they condemn him. I think that we fail badly to realize how non-Christians resent our failure to appreciate what their beliefs mean

to them and why they believe and act as they do. If we did understand them and acted like it I wonder if we might not be more successful in our dealings with them.

The lesson is, I think, that we must shake off enough of the ethnocentrism that besets us so that we can understand and appreciate the point of view of participants of other cultures and subcultures. If we can do this we will be better able to maintain the kind of relations which contribute to greater effectiveness in helping others and showing them to Christ. The Holy Spirit needs clean instruments for His work among men. Unnecessary ethnocentrism is too much like rust in its effect.

While there is much value in the doctrine of cultural relativism there is serious danger, too. Many young Christians are disturbed by it and wonder where we stop with the matter. A number are fearful that a too tolerant view will cause us to lose our evangelistic fervor. These fears are certainly understandable for it is possible for one to go too far in the direction of relativism or lose his zeal for spreading the Christian message.

If we are to avoid slipping into extreme relativism there has to be some kind of check. Logically, those who do not believe in a special revelation from God have no satisfactory safeguard against this. Few who profess to be total relativists practice it. While denying absolute values they actually abide by at least one--that is, the desirability of abiding by some set of values. They realize that the alternative will be chaos and unhappiness for themselves and others. Possibly most cultural relativists would admit that they value systems of value. It is widely recognized among thinking Christians that the people of Euro-American culture are still abiding by a significant number of the Christian standards of belief and conduct while having rejected the Scriptural foundation for them. They have come, as the case may be, either to value these standards without reference to their origin, or they conform because they realize they have to abide by some value system, and their native one is most congenial to them. The

members of unsophisticated societies who abide by non-Christian value systems generally adhere to their moral standards without questioning their validity, but in our own highly educated society it is becoming more apparent that the increasing acceptance of cultural and moral relativism is causing us to drift in the direction of the chaos and unhappiness which would result from the large scale abandonment of moral codes.

One good check on this might be the discovery of universals and absolutes through scientific research. I have already noted that some scientists are proposing that we can discover such universals and should, therefore, look for them. The practical flaw in this is that the nature of reality is so complex that it would be far too long a time until we could discover any significant percentage of the standards of conduct which God already knows are best for us and which He has told us about. We realize that, so far science has succeeded in discovering only a tiny fraction of all that is to be known. Perhaps it is slightly presumptuous of us to suppose that we can by scientific means discover a set of values which will enable human society to continue with some kind of orderliness. We who believe in God's Word would expect to find that any such discoveries would do little more than confirm the moral standards God has already given us.

It seems to me that, unless we accept the standards God has given us in Scripture we are quite at sea in regard to how to conduct ourselves in this life. Those who believe in extreme relativism are in the dilemma of believing in something they can't live by, and for the good of man let's hope that few do try to live by it. The somewhat more moderate view proposed by some still seems to fall short of what is needed.

The only satisfactory alternative is to go back to Scripture, read it objectively, and abide by its commandments. But we are not doing this. Instead, we utilize Scripture to support the cultural beliefs of our own group. This explains to a significant degree the diversity of

interpretations of Scripture.

This, of course, opens up the whole question of interpreting Scripture, which I don't intend to deal with here. From an anthropological viewpoint suffice it to say that we must understand Scripture against the background of the cultures of Biblical lands in Biblical times and work out its applications for the cultures of our day. The result should be a body of principles or absolutes which will apply to every culture; that is, they will be supercultural principles,[4] though their specific expression may vary from culture to culture.

If we know what these supercultural principles are we have standards by which to evaluate any culture, and we will have a check against too much relativism. We already have something like this, of course, but we have included a large number of standards which are purely cultural and have failed to distinguish them from the supercultural. Also, we have failed to include some supercultural principles which are clearly taught in Scripture.

If we can shed the blindness of ethnocentrism we will be able to see that every culture can be said to consist of three kinds of traits. There will be those which are, or would be, an adequate expression of supercultural Christianity. These can be retained and integrated with Christianity in a Christian culture. There also will be those customs which are definitely out of harmony with supercultural principles and ought not to be a part of a so-called Christian culture. There is no room for relativism here. Finally, there will be a large body of cultural beliefs and practices which seem to be neutral in regard to superculture. Such customs seem completely relative to the cultural context.[5]

All three kinds of traits will be found in every culture. We must uphold supercultural principles and their proper cultural expressions with proper evangelistic fervor. We should look for those customs in our culture which are out of harmony with the supercultural and try to correct

them. For those cultural traits which seem neutral we should avoid getting steamed up about them, exercise tolerance, and refrain from taking unnecessary and possibly destructive action. For missionaries it should be helpful to realize that, superculturally speaking, some primitive and non-Western cultures are really superior in some ways to our own Euro-American cultures and subcultures.

The Christian must realize that ethnocentrism blinds him to many things he needs to know. Though he may prefer his own culture, he should take the position that cultures as specific customs do differ in quality, but that they are to be evaluated by the supercultural principles to be found in God's Word rather than by unfavorable comparison with his own culture. Concerning supercultural principles, cultural relativism has no place. Otherwise, it is a most useful and badly needed concept.

NOTES

1. Redfield, Robert. The Primitive World And Its Transformations, New York: Cornell University Press, 1953.

2. "Statement on Human Rights", American Anthropologist, Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 539-543.

3 Kluckhohn, Clyde. Mirror For Man, New York: Whittlesy House, 1949, p. 41.

4. Smalley, Wm. A. and Fetzer, M. "A Christian View of Anthropology", Modern Science and Christian Faith, Wheaton, Ill: Van Kampen Press, 1950, pp. 103-104.

5. Actually I doubt if it is proper to say that any cultural trait is totally unrelated to supercultural principles. I am merely refering to the fact that there are many traits whose relationships to superculture we find it practically impossible to trace.

LETTERS AND BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

Theology And/Or Anthropology

The goal of modern Protestant missions is, in principle, at least, the establishment of indigenous churches. These are often, though not without qualification, characterized by the triple rubric, "self-governing, self-supporting, self-propogating." With this goal the anthropology-minded missionary is certainly in complete accord. In fact, he probably feels that most missions are not wholly yielded to the principle and fail in the practical execution of the idea. Certainly he must be chagrined by his colleagues who persist in their desire for a rubber-stamp model of the home church.

The only problem, then, that faces the anthropology-minded missionary is the achievement of the goal: How is the church to be established? What form must it take to become a natural part of the culture of the missionized peoples? In what form will it most likely persist?

These questions can be taken up only after the theological ones. For example, one should not establish an episcopal church government simply because the society is characterized by strong kings and subordinate lords.[1] The question of church government is not an anthropological but a theological one. Before beginning to apply his knowledge of a culture to the establishment of an indigenous church, the missionary must be convinced that either the congregational or the episcopal or some other form of church government is the kind Jesus Christ meant for every society, all over the world and at all times.

This procedure--first the theological and then the anthropological must be applied to a myriad of problems, especially among the so-called primitive peoples, such as theft, polygamy, premarital sexual relations, lying, lay and/or clerical marriages, etc.

It is one thing to be a Christian and another to be an anthropologist. As an anthropologist, I can agree with Dr.

Herskovits who maintains that all cultures are equally valid and that we can not evaluate some as better than others. He says that only God could do this, but "Let's not play God." As an anthropologist, I try to look dispassionately at a crude circumcision ceremony. I may interpret it as the functional equivalent of a high school graduation celebration--with or without the "beer bust"—but I also must evaluate in the light of the Scriptural dogma; I must "play God."

An anthropologist describes but a Christian prescribes. He believes that God has revealed a system which is absolutely right, valid for every society during every epoch. The anthropology minded Christian missionary, therefore, must not be so enchanted by his science that he fails to pursue the consummation of his goal: the establishment of a truly Christian but, nevertheless, indigenous Church.

Dr. George Horner, who has written for this journal, seems to be one of those who fails to recognize the priority of theology over anthropology. He writes: "The question of the validity of leaders at all and their position in their society should be a subject of anthropological study before they are imposed upon an unsuspecting society."[2] Thus, he appears to suggest that because the New Testament type of church leaders might be foreign to a certain society, one would be wise not to introduce them. This, to use his illustration, would be changing arithmetic so that poor Jack could understand it!

Let us ignore neither theology nor anthropology, but let us understand their functions.

William J. Samarin

French Equatorial Africa

NOTES

1. Episcopalians will understand that this is only an illustration.

2. "A Field Method: The Culture-Personality Approach," 1:29-34. Pp. 32-33 cited.

NOTES AND NEWS

Blight Teaches at Camp Wycliffe

Mr. Dick Blight, his wife, Faith, with their two children, Betty and Susan Jean, returned in June from their tribe in Mexico to help out with the program at the Summer Institute of linguistics on the University of Oklahoma campus. Dick taught phonemics and anthropology and Faith assisted in the Morphology Department.

The Blights are expecting to return to the field in November.

Loptson Works at Canadian Bible School

Mr. Gordon Loptson has accepted a position on the faculty of the Western Canadian Bible Institute at Regina, Saskatchewan. Among other subjects he is handling an anthropology course. Mr. Loptson received his preparation at Wheaton College (B.A., anthropology, 1949), Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M., 1953) and Missionary Training Institute (Th.B., 1954).

Samarin Labors in Africa

For two years Mr. William J. Samarin has been engaged in missionary, linguistic and anthropological work in the territory of Oubangui-Chari. Most of his extra-missionary activities have been linguistic. His first task was the study of Sango, the lingua franca of the area, which resulted in his publication of a pedagogical grammar of Sango. At the present time he is learning Gbea, a dialect of Gbaya. He is also gathering data on personal and dog names as well as proverbs. He is finding that this is teaching him much about the goals and motivations of the Gbea. He eventually plans to add riddles, songs, and tales. Further information about Gbea culture is being recorded chronologically in a notebook.

Mr. Samarin holds a degree in linguistics and anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley.